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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 1972, over 6500 black and white, male and female high school students in 23 northern Mississippi schools responded to questionnaires concerning their educational plans, when (early or late) they consider the best time to marry, whether they were sure they wanted to marry, and whether they were sure they actually would marry. Controlled variables, based on students' reports, include father's and mother's education, academic ability, grade point average, and the influence of significant others. The major method of analysis is Multiple Classification Analysis. Results indicate that white students are more likely than black students to be sure they want to marry some day. White females are more likely to be sure they want to marry than white males and black males and females. Females (both black and white) report earlier ages than males as the best time to marry. Those students who report earlier ages as the best time to marry are unlikely to plan to attend college; those who report later ages for marriage are the most likely to attend college. Marital timing decisions are most independent of educational plans among males, especially black males. Finally, females more often perceive marriage as an alternative to higher education, especially white females. (KC)

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MARITAL TIMING ASPIRATIONS AND EDUCATIONAL PLANS AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MARITAL TIMING ASPIRATIONS
AND EDUCATIONAL PLANS AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

The positive relationship between age at first marriage and educational attainment is well documented. Generally, early marriage is seen as an inhibitor of educational attainment, especially for women who tend to marry at earlier ages than men. But to say that early marriage inhibits educational attainment may be only partially correct. Most research to date examines the cross-sectional relationship between actual age at marriage and educational attainment. Thus it is impossible to distinguish those cases where education was interrupted due to a marriage from those cases where marriage followed the termination of formal schooling. Certainly, early marriage does not disrupt educational attainment among those who plan no additional education.

This study attempts to increase our understanding of the nature of the relationship between age at marriage and educational attainment by examining the relationship between marital timing aspirations and educational plans among high school students. This relationship is examined separately for white males, white females, black males, and black females since important race and sex differences in marital timing and the educational attainment process are well documented. It is hypothesized that those students who report earlier ages as the best time to marry will plan less education than those students who report later ages. Additionally, this study examines race and sex differences in the desire for marriage and marital timing

aspirations. It is hypothesized that females will be more certain that they want to marry than males and that they will report earlier ages as the best time for marriage.

The data indicate that white females are more likely to be sure they want to marry some day (89 percent) than white males (74 percent), black females (65 percent) or black males (58 percent). Also, white females are more likely to have thought about the best time to marry (77 percent) than white males (66 percent) or black males and females (61 percent). Additionally, females (both white and black) report earlier ages than males as the best time to marry. Most importantly, there is a substantial positive relationship between marital timing aspirations and educational plans for all groups except black males. Those students who report earlier ages as the best time to marry are very unlikely to plan on college, while those students who report later ages as the best time for marriage are the most likely to plan on college. Within each racial group, this relationship is stronger for females than for males.

In general, our understanding of the status attainment process has improved dramatically in the last decade. In large part, this is the result of researchers' attempts to elaborate a basic model of status attainment presented in Blau and Duncan's classic work on THE AMERICAN OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE (1967). Most attention has focused upon the "Wisconsin Model" which analyzes the effects of original socioeconomic status and intelligence, as mediated by social psychological variables, upon status attainment (Sewell and Hauser, 1975). This model has explained effectively about fifty percent of the total variation in attainment.

The success of the Wisconsin Model has been demonstrated for the most part with male samples. Even when females are included in analyses, there is little attention to qualitative differences in educational and occupational planning and attainment processes between females and males (Falk and Cosby, 1975). The most thorough analysis of sex differences in the educational attainment process to date is provided by Alexander and Eckland's (1974) panel study of a national sample of high school sophomores identified in 1955. Beginning with Sewell and Shah's (1967) finding that "female attainments appear to be more closely tied to the ascribed criterion of family background status" than is the case for males, they pursue a test of the Wisconsin model on a female population. They found that the "most significant feature of the full model was the direct, unmediated depressant sex effect on actual educational attainment" (1974:680). In view of these findings, they conclude that an explanation of the sex liability will require extending the model to include variables not considered in studies

of males. "This might involve the addition of marriage and fertility variables, 'sex-role specific' attitudes and socialization influences, and perhaps institutional discrimination as well" (1974:680).

Although we have witnessed recent changes in the adult roles of men and women, women continue to enter their first marriage about two years earlier than men (U.S. Census, 1979), they still are less likely to participate in the labor force (U.S. Census, 1979), and they continue to have the major responsibility for childcare. These important differences in the lives of men and women affect adult attainments. It has been demonstrated that anticipated labor force attachment is related to the educational plans of women (Clark and DeBord, 1981). In addition, there is a strong positive relationship between age at first marriage and the educational attainment of women (Marini, 1978). Marini notes that age at first marriage "has a stronger effect on the educational attainments of women than any of the variables usually considered in male models of the educational attainment process" (1978:483).

Nye and Berardo (1973) hypothesized that lower early academic achievements and aspirations increased the likelihood of early marriage. But the findings on the relationship between age at marriage and the educational attainment of men are mixed. Marini (1978) found no significant net relationship for men. Call and Otto (1977), after analyzing panel data on a male sample, concluded that age at marriage did not affect educational attainment once high school achievement was taken into account. But in a study of black and white males, Kerckhoff and Parrow (1979) concluded that "over and above the effects of a set of powerful explanatory variables, the fact of early marriage contributes to an explanation of educational attainment"(1979:106). They note, however, that this effect is not present

if the young man has begun college prior to early marriage. Hogan found that only "those activities that are time-consuming or otherwise disruptive of the smooth operation of normal life-cycle processes during the transition from adolescence to adulthood (such as college attendance and service in the military) seriously affect the age at which a man marries" (1978:161).

In 1978, the median age at first marriage was 21.1 for females and 23.0 for males (U.S. Census, 1979). The relationship between age at first marriage and educational attainment is stronger for females than for males possibly because more women marry at ages when marriage competes with formal education. In addition, marriage appears to be more disruptive to the educational attainment of females than of males. Of those students who drop out of college, a third of the women cite entrance into a marriage as the reason as compared to only a tenth of the men (Astin and Panos, 1969).

Closely associated with age at first marriage is age at first birth. Bumpass, Rindfuss, and Janosik (1978) found that early marriage and motherhood enhance rapid fertility. They note that the "experience of early motherhood, reinforced by a rapid subsequent fertility, limits the pursuit of other life options which might compete with childbearing" (1978:83). Waite and Moore (1978) found early motherhood associated with lower levels of educational attainment since the roles of student and mother compete. Bumpass, Rindfuss, and St. John (1980) argue that age at first marriage has a greater effect on education than age at first birth because first marriage schedules are younger than first birth schedules--more first marriages take place during the years when women are in school. Marshall and Cosby found that women "who in adolescence expressed a younger desired age at marriage tended to translate their aspirations into both early marriage and fertility.

In addition, women who as adolescents desired higher levels of educational attainment were inclined to postpone both marriage and childbearing" (1977:206).

Research indicates there are important racial differences in the age at first marriage, age at first birth, and the effect of these variables on educational attainment. Although black female students express a later desired age for marriage than white female students (Kuvlesky and Obordo, 1972), more black women marry at an early age than white women (Carlson, 1979; Spanier and Glick, 1980). But black women are more likely than white women to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (associated with dropping out of high school and early marriage). Carlson (1979) found that black women are less likely than white women from similar backgrounds to enter into early marriages and that black high school dropouts are less likely than white dropouts to enter into an early marriage. Carlson notes that "obstacles to early marriage for young black dropouts include astronomically high unemployment rates for their potential husbands, more restricted access to housing than for whites equivalently situated. . . and perhaps less potential for parental aid in establishing a new household . . . . Beyond obstacles to early marriage imposed by these socioeconomic constraints, black girls face different community and family norms and social controls related to pregnancy . . . . Premarital conception among whites seems more often to lead to early marriage, but among blacks to 'illegitimate' births" (1979:349). Although blacks are more likely than whites to be teenage mothers, age at first birth has a weaker effect on the educational attainment of black females than on that of white females. For white women, the educational decrement associated with a young first birth (at age 15 or younger) is double that of blacks (Waite and Moore, 1978).

In addition, the marriage market differs for black and white women. Black women face "a restricted field of eligibles" when compared to white women due to a low sex ratio for the ages when first marriages are most likely to occur. Spanier and Glick found that "black women enlarge their field of eligibles by marrying males who tend to be older, who have lower educational attainment, and who have previously been married" (1980:707).

The positive relationship between age at first marriage and educational attainment is well documented. Generally, early marriage is seen as an inhibitor of educational attainment, especially for women who tend to marry at earlier ages than men. But to say that early marriage inhibits educational attainment may be only partially correct. Most research to date examines the cross-sectional relationship between actual age at marriage and educational attainment. Thus it is impossible to distinguish those cases where education was interrupted due to a marriage from those cases where marriage followed the termination of formal schooling. Certainly, early marriage does not disrupt educational attainment among those who plan no additional education.

This study attempts to increase our understanding of the nature of the relationship between age at marriage and educational attainment by examining the relationship between marital timing aspirations and educational plans among high school students. This relationship is examined separately for white males, white females, black males, and black females since important race and sex differences in marital timing and the educational attainment process are well documented. It is hypothesized that those students who report earlier ages as the best time to marry will plan less education than those students who report later ages. Additionally, this study examines race and sex differences in the desire for marriage and marital timing

aspirations. It is hypothesized that females will be more certain that they want to marry than males and that they will report earlier ages as the best time for marriage.

Methodology

Sample

In the spring of 1972 questionnaires were administered to all students enrolled in 23 northern Mississippi public schools (N=6556). These schools make up seven individual school systems; three are county school districts and four are town or city school districts. All of the residential communities are rural or small town. With the exception of two of the school systems, all of the districts are unitary; that is, all children of each school grade in the district attend the same school. Some selectivity in desegregation remains because of the emergence of private segregated "academies," but this influence is significant in only two of the systems.

Measures

1. The student's educational plans is coded 0 if the student does not plan on 4 years of college and 1 if the student plans on 4 years of college.

2. Marital timing aspirations is based on the student's response to the fixed-format question: "When do you think is the best time to marry?" Six response alternatives were available, ranging from "in high school" to "five or more years after high school" and includes "I haven't thought much about it" as the sixth choice.

In the analysis, father's and mother's education, academic ability,

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grade point average, and the influence of significant others (parents, peers, and counselors/teachers) are controlled. Past research has shown all of these variables to be importantly related to the educational plans of high school students (e.g., Sewell and Hauser, 1975; Alexander, Eckland, and Griffin, 1975; DeBord, Griffin, and Clark, 1977). All control variables are based on students' reports except academic ability and grade point average which were obtained from school records.

Students also were asked if they were sure they wanted to marry. Response alternatives were "very sure I want to marry," "pretty sure I want to marry," "pretty unsure," and "very unsure I want to marry." In addition, students were asked how sure they were that they actually would marry. Response alternatives were "certain I will," "pretty certain I will," "some possibility I will not," and "pretty strong possibility I will not."

Method of Analysis

The major method of analysis used in this study is Multiple Classification Analysis (MCA) which is "a technique for examining the interrelationships between several predictor variables and a dependent variable within the context of an additive model" (Andrews et al., 1973:1). MCA is based on the assumption that the effects of the independent variables are additive. Therefore, MCA is not sensitive to interaction effects. MCA is suitable to the problem since the independent variables can be nominal, ordinal, or interval in their measurement.

Findings

The data in Table 1 indicate that white students are more likely than black students to be sure they want to marry some day. In addition,

within each racial group, females are more likely than males to be sure they want to marry. White females are the most likely to be sure they want to marry (89.6 percent) while black males are the least likely to be sure they want to marry (58.2 percent).

The data in Table 1 also indicate that white students are more likely than black students to feel certain they actually will marry. Within each racial group, females are more likely than males to feel certain they will marry. Again, white females are the most likely to feel certain they will marry (86.3 percent) while black males are the least likely to feel certain they will marry (65.3 percent). Interestingly, with the exception of white females, the percentage of students who feel certain they will marry is slightly larger than the percentage who are sure they want to marry. This difference is greatest for black students.

Not only are white females more sure they want to marry and more certain they actually will marry, but they also are more likely to have thought about the best time to marry (76.6 percent) than white males (66.2 percent) or black males and females (60.7 percent) (see Table 2). Among those students who have thought about the best time to marry, females (both black and white) report earlier ages than males as the best time to marry. The majority of the males consider three or more years after high school as the best time to marry (61.8 percent for white males and 61.9 percent for black males) while about half of the females consider less than three years after high school as the best time to marry (51.0 percent for white females and 51.2 percent for black females). Few students feel that the best time to marry is while they are still in high school.

There is a substantial positive relationship between marital timing aspirations and educational plans for all groups except black males. Those

students who report earlier ages as the best time to marry are very unlikely to plan on college, while those students who report later ages as the best time for marriage are the most likely to plan on college. Within each racial group, this unadjusted relationship is stronger for females than for males. Additionally, the relationship is stronger for whites than for blacks. In all four groups, the largest proportion of students planning on four years of college is among those who feel the best time to marry is five or more years after high school (75 percent for white males, 78 percent for white females, 63 percent for black males, and 72 percent for black females). With the exception of black males, few students who feel the best time to marry is in high school or immediately after high school plan on college (28 and 29 percent for white males, 10 and 13 percent for white females, and 26 and 22 percent for black females.

Although the strength of the relationship between marital timing aspirations and educational plans diminishes when we control for father's and mother's education, academic aptitude, grades, and significant other influence, the relationship continues to be positive.

Discussion

This paper has addressed the issue of marital timing plans as they relate to other life goals. Previous research on status attainment has generally ignored this issue. The persistent relationship between early marriage and educational and occupational attainment which is commonly reported has been shown to result from career decisions and choices which young people make prior to beginning higher education. For this reason, the age group which we have studied is especially appropriate for analyzing

sex-role specific attitudes and plans for marriage and educational plans.

In general, our findings replicate those reported by Kerckhoff and Parrow (1979) for males. Plans for an early marriage, as early marriage itself, tend to depress educational plans even when parental education, academic aptitude, grades, and significant other influence are held constant. This is true for black and white, males and females. Our data suggest that marital timing decisions are most independent of college plans among males, especially black males. It appears that females more often perceive marriage as an alternative to higher education, especially white females. The profile of marital timing choices of black females is most like that of white males and sex differences are larger for blacks than for whites. One possible explanation of these differences may be the different patterns of career socialization for black and white males and females. Black parents, unlike whites, may devalue traditional definitions of the female role in school and society. An earlier study of the students in this sample reported that "net of the remaining variables in the model, black women receive more parental encouragement for college attendance than black men, a reversal of the experience for white students" (DeBord, Griffin, and Clark, 1977:100). A second consideration relevant to the issues under study is the coherence of the "achievement syndrome" among black males or realism of expressed goals (DeBord, 1977).

To the extent that white females choose marriage as an alternative to higher education, efforts to alter socialization in such a way as to encourage deferral of marriage may not result in increased higher education for this group. Neither will efforts to alter the structure of supports so as to allow married women to pursue higher education have much impact.

TABLE 1

INTENT TO MARRY BY RACE AND SEX

	N	Percent who are sure they want to marry some day[a]	Percent who are certain they will actually marry[b]
White Males	1474	74.6	77.4
White Females	1415	89.6	86.3
Black Males	778	58.2	65.3
Black Females	854	65.6	74.6

[a]Coded from "Very sure I want to marry" and "Pretty sure I want to marry".

[b]Coded from "Certain I will marry someday" and "Pretty certain I will marry someday".

TABLE 2

MARITAL TIMING ASPIRATIONS BY RACE AND SEX

MARITAL TIMING ASPIRATIONS	WHITE MALES	WHITE FEMALES	BLACK MALES	BLACK FEMALES
ALL STUDENTS				
Best Time to Marry:				
In high school	1.2%	2.9%	2.7%	2.7%
Immediately after high school	3.9%	8.1%	5.3%	7.4%
1-2 years after high school	20.2%	28.1%	15.2%	21.1%
3-4 years after high school	21.3%	23.1%	17.1%	15.5%
5 or more years after high school	19.6%	14.4%	20.4%	14.1%
Haven't thought about it	33.8%	23.4%	39.3%	39.2%
TOTAL	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
(N)	(1474)	(1415)	(778)	(854)
ALL STUDENTS EXCEPT THOSE WHO HAVE NOT THOUGHT ABOUT IT				
Best Time to Marry:				
In high school	1.8%	3.8%	4.5%	4.4%
Immediately after high school	5.9%	10.5%	8.7%	12.1%
1-2 years after high school	30.4%	36.7%	25.0%	34.7%
3-4 years after high school	32.2%	30.2%	28.2%	25.4%
5 or more years after high school	29.6%	18.8%	33.7%	23.3%
TOTAL	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
(N)	(976)	(1084)	(472)	(519)

TABLE 3

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MARITAL TIMING ASPIRATIONS AND EDUCATIONAL PLANS BY RACE AND SEX

Best Time to Marry	N	Proportion Planning on 4 Years of College: Unadjusted	Proportion Planning on 4 Years of College: Adjusted*
WHITE MALES			
In high school	18	.28	.45
Immediately after high school	58	.29	.43
1-2 years after high school	297	.37	.47
3-4 years after high school	314	.68	.58
5 or more years after high school	289	.75	.60
Haven't thought about it	498	.44	.51
Eta or Beta		.32	.10
Group Mean		.53	
Total Cases	1474		
WHITE FEMALES			
In high school	41	.10	.28
Immediately after high school	114	.13	.28
1-2 years after high school	398	.30	.36
3-4 years after high school	327	.67	.57
5 or more years after high school	204	.78	.61
Haven't thought about it	331	.41	.46
Eta or Beta		.42	.22
Group Mean		.46	
Total Cases	1415		
BLACK MALES			
In high school	21	.47	.55
Immediately after high school	41	.39	.44
1-2 years after high school	118	.26	.30
3-4 years after high school	133	.49	.49
5 or more years after high school	159	.63	.55
Haven't thought about it	306	.47	.48
Eta or Beta		.22	.16
Group Mean		.47	
Total Cases	778		
BLACK FEMALES			
In high school	23	.26	.36
Immediately after high school	63	.22	.30
1-2 years after high school	180	.37	.41
3-4 years after high school	132	.53	.44
5 or more years after high school	121	.72	.63
Haven't thought about it	335	.47	.49
Eta or Beta		.27	.17
Group Mean		.47	
Total Cases	854		

*Adjusted for father's education, mother's education, academic aptitude, grade point average, teacher/counselor education encouragement, parental educational encouragement, and best friend's educational plans.

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